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Bikinis, Pies Pull in Polar Voters

By Miriam Elder

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NARYAN-MAR, Nenets Autonomous District -- Galina Vladimirovna put on her nicest dress and best fur coat Sunday morning, and told her 70-year-old mother to do the same.

There was no wedding or holiday to celebrate -- they were going to vote.

"We simply ran to the voting booth," said Galina, 35, a mother of two. She spent the entire morning at the House of Culture in Iskatelei, a village in the heart of the Nenets Autonomous District, inside the Arctic Circle.

Even in one of Russia's most isolated regions -- no trains or roads connect Nenets with what locals call "the mainland" -- Dmitry Medvedev emerged as the clear favorite following a sustained campaign that focused on his endorsement by President Vladimir Putin.

"We voted for Putin the first time around and the second, now we voted for Medvedev and we'll continue this way," Galina said. "The very fact that he cares is something, that his policies reach our small town."

In December's State Duma elections, Nenets registered the country's lowest voter turnout and United Russia support after St. Petersburg, the city where Putin and Medvedev come from. In Nenets, the ruling party took 48.75 percent of the vote -- a far cry from the near-100 percent numbers recorded in some North Caucasus republics.

Officials and residents in this oil-rich region blamed the poor showing in the Duma elections on a budget dispute with the neighboring Arkhangelsk region that erupted just before the vote. This time, they said, things would be different.

The House of Culture in Iskatelei, the region's second-biggest settlement, was full of children and voters who had been invited to a free daylong entertainment program after casting their ballots.

Feasting on freshly cooked shashlik and homemade pies sold on the premises, Galina and her mother had just left the next room, where six young women clad in small white bikinis danced and cavorted for an audience of all ages in front of a Russian flag made out of red, white and blue balloons.

"Did you see how wonderfully the kids danced?" Galina's mother said, smiling.

Efforts to get out the vote Sunday, amid a light snowfall and a temperature of minus 28 degrees Celsius, appeared to be successful here. Officials reported a turnout of 45.76 percent of registered voters by 2 p.m., soon before the short day in this polar region -- which sees no sunlight between December and February -- begins drawing to a close.

At another voting site in the back of the House of Culture, music was blaring away and the food was plentiful. Tatyana Medvedeva, the official in charge, was loudly enthusiastic. She gave the day's first voter a calendar, and presented a Russian flag to a woman who was celebrating her birthday on Sunday.

Marina Obdurazakova, 19, a first-time voter, got a pin proclaiming: "I am going to vote in the March 2 presidential elections," a pen saying, "The North is cool!" and a hearty handshake from Medvedeva.

"Be healthy and happy and come vote again!" Medvedeva said, after presenting the gifts to the shy teenager.

Dozens of voters, including Obdurazakova, said they voted for Medvedev, but few could give concrete reasons why. Their answers sounded like cheery slogans borrowed from United Russia, the party created to back Putin and now his successor, Medvedev.

"I voted because this is for the future of our country," Obdurazakova said.

"I voted for Medvedev because our current president, Putin, supported him," said Dmitry, 37, a lawyer voting at School No. 1 in Naryan-Mar, the nearby town of 18,000 people that serves as the region's administrative capital.

Another voter, Viktor Shirokov, 51, said: "I voted for Medvedev because we need stability. The most important thing a president must take care of is stability inside the country and the fight against corruption."

As voters turned out enthusiastically, the head of the regional United Russia branch, Maxim Gorelik, appeared relaxed about the vote.

"There's less pressure this time," he said in an interview in a local restaurant on Saturday. "For the Duma elections, the key was to achieve a constitutional majority."

Gorelik said he had received no instructions from party headquarters this time. "During the Duma elections, they would call us every two hours asking about turnout," he said.

Nenets, although an area twice the size of Portugal, is home to just 42,000 people. Yet it also boasts major projects by Rosneft and LUKoil, and living standards are rising on the back of $100 per barrel oil prices. Construction cranes tower around Naryan-Mar, and last year the average monthly wage reached 36,000 rubles ($1,500), well above the national average.

In the early 2000s, the region was awash in scandals as governors, backed by competing oil companies, struggled to remain in power. Fiercely independent, mainly because of their total disconnect from Moscow, the people of Nenets protested Putin's decree to do away with elections for regional government, and held the country's last such election in February 2005.

"I spoiled my ballot, and voted for no one," said Sergei Mamykin, 46, a taxi driver. "I put a check next to two names to register a protest vote."

"Putin and his crew, the worst thing they've done over the past eight years was to create a legal vacuum -- they think that everyone, every region, should just feed Moscow. In the long term, this policy is suicide."

Of Nenets' 29,700 registered voters, 9,277 -- about a third -- voted in advance. Over the past two weeks, election workers fanned out across the district's vast and inhospitable tundra to reach the indigenous nomad Nenets and oil workers who live far from the main settlements.

Boris Dulnev, the region's human rights ombudsman, said he had registered no violations during the voting.

"There are always problems in this district because of the size of the territory and the fact that there are no normal roads," Dulnev said. "Last time it was hard, because they couldn't get to everybody. Here it depends on the will of God, not on people's work."

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